DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 880 IR 014 000

AUTHOR Parer, Michael S.
TITLE Students' Experience of External Studies. Student Diary Project.
INSTITUTION Gippsland Inst., Churchill (Australia). Centre for Distance Learning.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-909-170-15-0
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 25p.
AVAILABLE FROM Centre for Distance Learning, Gippsland Institute, Switchback Road, Churchill 3842, Victoria, Australia ($20.00).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Diaries; Distance Education; *External Degree Programs; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Instructional Design; Instructional Materials; Qualitative Research; *Student Attitudes; *Student Interests; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Australia

ABSTRACT

This study examined students' experiences of external study at Gippsland Institute through the method of student self-report study diaries. Questions which were addressed include: (1) Why are external students taking courses at Gippsland? (2) What do they hope to gain? (3) How do they handle particular study guides and assignment materials? (4) What is the nature of the social context in which external study occurs? and (5) Overall, how do students perceive their external study experience? The distribution between an intrinsic vocational orientation (i.e., related to career interests) and an extrinsic vocational orientation (i.e., obtaining qualifications for the specific goal of gaining employment) was clearly visible in student diaries. Very few instances of academic orientation occurred. A range of personal orientations to study resulted; while some students are primarily focused towards personal development and change, others have a more extrinsic orientation. Some students wanted mainly to prove their capability for higher education after leaving high school at an early age. Two approaches to studying emerged from the data: while most diaries indicated a focus on reproducing and memorizing information, some suggested an attempt to gain understanding and go beyond the information presented and focus on constructing meaning. Almost all of the diaries made reference to "finding time" for study in the face of completing work, domestic, and social commitments. The diaries show a very traditional gender division of labor within the family. For women students especially, external study demands some reconstruction of the social structure in the family and domestic setting. (GL)

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STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF EXTERNAL STUDY

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STUDENT DIARY PROJECT

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STUDENT DIARY PROJECT

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National Library of Australia
Cataloguing in Publication

Parer, Michael
Students' experience of external study

Bibliography.
ISBN 0 909 170 15 0.

1. Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education - Students. 2. Distance education - Victoria. 3. Students, Part-time - Victoria. I. Morgan, Alistair. II. De Bolfo, Gina. III. Benson, Robyn. IV. Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, Centre for Distance Learning. V. Title.

378'.1554'099456

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STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF EXTERNAL STUDIES

STUDENT DIARY PROJECT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page No
Introduction	1
Phase One	2
Students' Experience of External Studies	3
Conclusions	5
Areas for Future Research and Evaluation	6
Phase Two	
Methodology	7
Students' Orientations to Study	7
(i) Vocational Orientation	8
(ii) Academic Orientation	8
(iii) Personal Orientation	8
Students' Development as Learners and Approaches to Study	9
Course Design and Assessment	10
The Social Context of External Study	12
Phase Three	
Student Number One	13
Student Number Two	15
Student Number Three	17
Conclusion	18
References	19

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF EXTERNAL STUDY

STUDENT DIARY PROJECT

Introduction

How do external students come to be taking courses at Gippsland? What do they hope to gain from external study? At a more detailed level, how do students handle particular study guides and assignment materials? what is the nature of the social context in which external study occurs? At the general level - what is it 'really like' to undertake external study with Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education - How do students experience study when it is viewed from their perspective?

The present study is an attempt to address these questions through the method of student self-report study diaries. This method of a diary recording of experiences of studying can be described as broadly within a qualitative approach to research and evaluation.

There is a considerable body of literature on research and evaluation in education which attempts to describe learning in a natural setting. For example:

Entwistle and Hounsell (1979) identified a trend in research in student learning towards qualitative methodologies so as to increase the relevance of the findings for practising teachers.

Similarly, Wilson (1977) and Filstead (1979) argue for an ethnographic or qualitative approach to research and evaluation in education so that the complexity of the student and his or her ability to reflect upon experience are recognised. This is in contrast to traditional evaluation and mechanistic models of learning which ignore the conscious control of the learners over their strategies and approaches to studying.

A study diary provides one possible way to describe students' experiences of external study.

This study was undertaken in three phases, and the results of each of them are included in this report.

The first was a 'Pilot' phase with 12 students participating and was reported in the student newspaper 'COMMUNIQUE' in July 1983.

The second phase selected one hundred and one students from four units, of whom forty-eight participated. A preliminary report was given at the Higher Education Research and Development Association of Australasia in May 1984.

The third phase was the interviewing of three of the participating students, and writing their study experience as case studies.

Phase One

In the second semester of 1982 students were invited to participate in a project to look at various aspects of external studies and, in particular, the study methods used by students. Twelve students offered, and were given a diary to fill in over a thirty day period. The students were from a variety of areas and were all external students. They were supplied with an A5 desk diary and were given a fairly open brief on how and what to record.

The students who participated filled them in with varying degrees of detail and were then analysed by the Educational Development and Research Unit. To assist in the data analysis interpretation and possible future directions, assistance was sought from Dr Alistair Morgan, a lecturer in Educational Technology and Head of the Study Methods Group at the Open University in the United Kingdom.
The project was important, as Gippsland Institute is a major provider in Distance Education, so designated by the Victorian Post Secondary Education Commission (VPSEC), with a future role to offer courses externally not only in the Latrobe Valley region but to students throughout Victoria.

The project was also important to discover the special needs of our students,both for the course design, the administration of the external studies system, and to enhance the teaching and learning process.

A key feature of any qualitative method is that students' responses are not pre-coded from the teachers' or researchers' perspectives and the analysis is not derived from pre-specified hypotheses - the analysis is essentially inductive, uncovering 'significant phenomena' or 'essence' in a student's experience.

Glaser and Strauss (1976) describe the advantages of this approach:

> "The consequence of the traditional approach is often a forcing of data, as well as a neglect of relevant concepts and hypotheses to emerge. This enables the analyst to ascertain which, if any, existing formal theory may help him generate his substantive theories."

The analysis carried out on these Gippsland Institute student diaries consisted broadly of four rather different levels:

(i) reading each diary to gain familiarity with the content;

(ii) simplifying what each student recorded, or getting at the 'essence'; shortening the diary, but without losing the meaning;

(iii) comparing and contrasting what each student recorded - identifying variations and common themes in the diaries;

(iv) describing the variations between students, and relating their experiences to other concepts and theories of how students learn, and using quotations from the diaries to illustrate and highlight students' experiences.

Obviously, with a sample of twelve students, any conclusion must be cautious. This type of qualitative case study research provides a generalisability in the sense that these experiential summaries can provide a relevance to the reader or users of the findings. This type of research aims to raise people's awareness of activities and events in a particular setting so that links and parallels can be drawn to inform practice in other settings and new contexts.

Students' Experience of External Studies

An overwhelming impression gained from many of the diaries was the crucial impact of students' social and domestic contexts on their study. There were numerous references to problems of 'getting down to it' and difficulties of almost continuous family and domestic interruptions. A typical example is:

> "I tried to read the tutor's comments on my assignment but gave up - kids too insistent on my attention".

The basic problem of 'time management' was quite a common theme in students' records:

> "At one time I just studied at night when everyone was asleep, but sometimes the older ones are awake and still up when I'm ready to start - still my plan was one and a half to two hours at night. One needs to stick to it, but I don't know how - being flexible is a big plus for most 'committed elsewhere' people and I just don't want to lose that - I'm just sick of being over-flexible."

Besides domestic organisational issues, there was one instance of hostility from a student's children. They were complaining about the time their mother spent studying - 'you always say you have to study!'.

Without wanting to underestimate the problem of finding time for studying, some of the difficulties of 'getting started' and 'getting going' on assignments seemed to be related to whether students knew what was expected of them. There were many diary entries of students not knowing what to do for assignments.

One student diary described an assignment like this:

> "Colonialism and Neo-colonialism - Australia and Latin-America - A Comparison: What basis, what country, what aspect - getting frustrated - don't know how to tackle the assignment - stuck again . . . This is always the worst time - getting off the ground and deciding the line of attack."

The process of 'sussing out' the system and gaining a feel for what is required in assignments can be a difficult and slow process, especially in off-campus study, where the immediate student peer group is absent. The absence or difficulty of interaction means that problems cannot be addressed and students can remain 'stuck' for considerable periods of time.

Here is one student's comment after a weekend lecture/tutorial session, where there is opportunity for face-to-face exchanges with a lecturer and other students:

> "The lecture-seminar was very helpful, for the outline of an assignment was given . . . a great pity this outline was not given earlier. I really missed contact with the lecturer and other students if only to 'let off steam' and discuss progress. External study is never knowing where you've gone wrong until you get your assignment back - sometimes months later."

Another example was from a psychology student:

> "I feel very tired and depressed - still feel the whole thing, the assignment, was a mess - it was so difficult to know what was required. It would be such a help to see what other students were submitting and the sorts of grades they got . . . we have been given a model report to follow but I found the references for this topic all conflicted and I found it very hard to work anything out."

The major impact of the nature and style of the assessment system in influencing students' experiences of study has been well documented on many settings, see, for example, Rowntree (1977). Arrangements to facilitate more dialogue between students and tutor, non-assessed outlines of assignments, two-stage assignments and telephone tuition are areas that could usefully be built into the Gippsland Institute course design.

Some students found an ambiguity and lack of clarity in the setting out of assignments. There appeared a breakdown in clear communication from the lecturer and consequently the lack of confidence and 'fear of failure' came over as a theme in the diaries:

> "The assignment is due next week . . . I'm slowly gaining an understanding of the topic, though not well enough to more than paraphrase what is in the text . . . for a nurse and mother of small children, the switch from the practical world to the abstract one of study is difficult . . . I feel anxiety about the exam and probable inability to obtain a pass on this assignment."

Some of the diary entries about problems of getting started and the difficulties of interruptions could be described as "disorganised study habits". Helping these students might be seen as offered guidance on 'finding the best time to work' or 'working to set schedules' - essentially mechanistic and prescriptive views of how to study. This type of guidance misses more fundamental issues concerning what students are trying to do in their studies and how they are going about them. There was clear evidence in the diaries that some students are attempting to 'reproduce the information' in their attempts at study. The task is seen as essentially one of remembering. Confusion and difficulty with study arises immediately because of the volume of information presented and assignments which are not merely aimed at this low-level task.

> "I find sociology difficult - I'm not familiar with the special language. I doubt I will be able to recall much or express myself without the text books."

Other diary records suggested that some students were taking 'surface approaches' to their studies.

The importance of the distinction of deep and surface approaches to study was identified by Marton and Saljo (1976). The approach to study was functionally related to the content and quality of the learning outcomes of what students gained when asked to read academic articles. Two qualitatively different approaches to study were identified; a surface approach, where students attempted to memorise and reproduce the information, and a deep approach, where students were trying to understand the overall meaning and message. Students who took a deep approach gained a full understanding of the articles, in contrast to those who took a surface approach and failed to understand the articles. Similar variations in approach to study have also been identified with students studying at a distance with the Open University in Britain (Morgan, Gibbs and Taylor, 1982). In this context, helping students is concerned with raising their awareness of how and why they tackle study in a particular way in order to assist their development as learners. This view of study skills focuses on the overall process of study skills and the quality of learning outcomes as a 'skilled performance' rather than on prescriptive techniques or methods, see, for example, Marton F and Stevenson L (1982) and Gibbs (1981).

Although the student quoted above was clearly taking a surface approach in relation to the task of reading and writing, in other contexts learning was perceived in a very different way. One found that discussing social science ideas with her husband helped her studying:

> "I'd just read Dinkhiem - he quizzed me on the subject and I had to explain what it meant - maybe husbands can be useful in the study programme, I'll see if I can involve him more."

Although this opportunity for learning through discussion was not formally organised by Gippsland Institute, the experience helped this student go beyond the 'information given' and develop her own construct system by having to explain it to someone else.

The value of learning through discussion was recognised by other students in the organised weekend tutorial sessions. The seminar groups were seen as enjoyable and at times far more useful than the conventional lecture.

The problems of getting formation and finding out what is required has already been highlighted in relation to the graded assignments. The same applies even more so to examination requirements. Descriptions of frustration and disgust came over in one diary where details of changes in the examination had apparently only been notified at a vacation school which this student had been unable to attend. It was almost as if the 'rules of the game' were being changed after the game had actually commenced!

Another aspect of students' experience of study that could be discerned in some diaries was their orientation to learning. Orientation to learning is defined as 'all those attitudes and aims which express the students' individual relationship with a course of study and the University', (Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs, 1981). Motivation is often used to describe variations in students' capabilities for study, however, rather than being more or less motivated, students are oriented to qualitatively different things in their studies.

The main distinctions in orientations to learning are academic, personal and vocational. The concept of orientation helps to interpret some of the diary data and understand better how a student is studying.

Here is an example:

> "My problem is that I'm not sufficiently motivated - this study is just one of my activities - no job prospect or promotion depends on it - as such it's probably useless - but having got this far I might as well finish I suppose.

There is clearly little interest in the course itself, although a qualification or credit seems to be desired, essentially a personal extrinsic orientation.

Conclusions

Although the diaries contained a large amount of information, much of it did not provide particularly powerful insights into how students were tackling their studies. Entries such as

> 4 - 6pm - read books and worked on assignment - drank coffee"

did not tell what a student was trying to do during the study period. In spite of this, the experiences of learning described above seemed 'significant phenomena' to this first enquiry and could feed into discussions on course development. This type of research could raise academics' awareness of what external study is like from the students' reality.

Areas for Future Research and Evaluation

The open-ended diaries used in 1982 generated rather mechanistic responses from many students, partly because of the format of the pages, with hour to hour sessions, and also through the lack of specificity on how to respond. The diaries do not seem to have encouraged students to be reflective about their studies.

This project continued to a next phase when the diaries were tailored to special questions such as: Describe activities in your studies which have helped and assisted your learning activities and experiences, and those which have hindered or frustrated your learning.

The second phase was planned to look into the concept of orientation to learning, approaches to study and the conception of learning which seems useful to understand student learning.

Phase Two

Methodology

Diaries were sent to students taking the following courses in 1984 - Introduction to Economics, Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Sociology and Electrical Machines. Students were selected at random and 101 diaries were mailed to students. With reminder letters during the study period, just over 50 percent of the diaries were returned.

The courses chosen for this study arose through discussions with faculty staff who had expressed an interest in finding out more about external students.

The diaries covered the first 'study guide' of each course - approximately one months work, comprising set readings, specially prepared study guides, a weekend school and submission of an assignment. The diaries were based on an A5 format desk diary; students were asked to reflect on their studies - to record issues which had assisted or progressed their work - issues which had frustrated or impeded study. Also they were asked:

> "How do you come to be taking this course - what do you hope to gain from study with Gippsland Institute?"

Obviously the returned diaries were varied in the detail and quality of the recordings. However, twenty nine diaries contained detailed information which provided insights into how and why students were studying.

Although the analysis of the diaries was carried out by reading and re-reading students' reporting, this analysis was informed by the theoretical framework of research into student learning which attempts to describe students' realities of learning (see Marton F, Entwistle N, and Hounsell D (eds) 1984 'The Experience of Learning').

As noted earlier, with a small sample and low response rate, there is no claim for statistical generalisability. However, this type of research provides a generalisability in the sense that these experiential summaries can raise awareness to issues and improve practice in other settings.

This analysis of the diaries revealed a number of key issues or theoretical concepts: students' orientations to study, their conception of learning and approach to study, the social context of external study, how aspects of course design and assessment influence learning, and systemic and organisational aspects of external study and Gippsland Institute. These key issues will be described and then a small number of case studies of individual students will be presented to highlight the major points.

Students' Orientations to Study

Orientation to study is the collection of attitudes, aims and purposes that express a student's relationship with a course of study and the institution or college (Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs, 1981). Orientation to study forms the broad background personal context which will influence how students will tackle a particular learning task. Motivation is often used to explain variations in students' apparent capabilities in their studies. However, from students' perspectives, they are not more or less motivated but oriented to qualitatively different aspects of studying.

With Open University students, three main types of orientation have been identified: vocational, academic and personal, each with sub-categories of intrinsic and extrinsic. These categories of orientation prove to be robust concepts for making sense of how external students come to be studying at Gippsland Institute.

(i) Vocational Orientation

Vocational reasons for undertaking external study are probably the most frequently mentioned amongst academic staff, when talking about external students. Many students can be described as having vocational orientations. The distribution between an intrinsic and extrinsic vocational orientation was clearly visible in the student diaries. The intrinsic orientation relates to following a career, developing and updating previous qualifications for newly emerging career interests.
In contrast, a vocational extrinsic orientation describes students who want the qualification for the specific goal of gaining employment. In one case the goal was described as purely a financial incentive in order to meet consumer aspirations:

> "I want my qualification badly enough to battle through almost any obstacle . . . I want my qualification so I can earn some money just as an emergency teacher. Geoff earns enough for us to get by - all our basic needs are met. I don't feel I need to work to get out of the house - I take my role as mother and housekeeper pretty seriously. I just want a bit of extra money so I don't have to say no to myself so often - by nature I'm extravagant."

(ii) Academic Orientation

The traditional aims of higher education - scholarship, learning and research are reflected in academic orientations. An extrinsic academic orientation describes a student who is concerned with progression up the academic ladder. For example, students who continue subjects in which they gained good grades at school - they almost drifted into higher education because that was expected of them. In contrast, an academic intrinsic orientation reflects students' interest in the content, an intellectual interest in the subject matter for its own sake.

With the external students in this study, there were very few instances of academic orientations. This is particularly interesting in alerting faculty teaching staff to what external students 'are really like', when their own orientations as students were probably primarily academic ones.

Descriptions of students' orientations to study are idealised cases. In practice, a student's description of how he or she came to be studying will be a more complex mix of various types of orientation.

Orientation to study provides an holistic description of motivation, and enables us to understand more about what a student is doing when confronted with a specific assignment or learning task.

(iii) Personal Orientation

Personal orientations to study describe very different aims and aspirations of external study. Some students are primarily focused towards personal development and change. This intrinsic orientation was particularly widespread with women students who wanted to develop beyond their traditional roles in the family.

For example:

> "I want to get my BA not for economic reasons, I want to expand my own store of knowledge and open my mind to new ideas. Do something for me for a change, to continue to grow and develop."

Another student expressed it thus:

> "Since studying with Gippsland Institute I have learnt so much and discovered a new appreciation of literature and history that has enriched by life - there is no monetary gain in achieving a degree - to me the gain will be in keeping alert, interested and aware of the modern world."

Besides the orientation towards personal growth and development, there were instances of a more extrinsic orientation - students want to prove their capability for post-secondary education after leaving high school at an early age.

> "There is the pride I feel when I can tell people that I hope one day to have a business degree, when I thought I would never amount to anything more than a housewife or perhaps a clerk."

Students' Development as Learners and Approaches to Study

How do students change and develop as a result of their college experiences? How did students describe their work from the study guides and in attempting the assignments? Perry (1970) at Harvard University interviewed students during each year of their undergraduate studies. He described how students developed their epistemological framework. Initially students held absolutist conceptions of knowledge, where the teacher was perceived as the authority figure, and the students' task was to learn the 'right answers' provided by the teacher. Subsequently, students developed to more relativistic conceptions of knowledge, where competing or conflicting theories of explanation must be examined in context and for their coherence or explanation of data. Finally, Perry identified some students who developed a personal commitment to a particular position within this relativistic conception of knowledge.

Saljo (1979) investigated students' conceptions of learning by asking them:

> "What do you actually mean by learning?"

He identified five distinct conceptions. Conception 1, 2, and 3 are concerned with learning as an accumulation of information, the memorisation of facts and learning set procedures or algorithms to be used in practice. In contrast, conceptions 4 and 5 describe learning as "the abstraction of meaning" and as "an interpretive process aimed at understanding some aspect of reality". The major distinction in conceptions of learning is how in conceptions 1, 2 and 3 learning is a taken-for-granted, passive event with the emphasis on reproducing information. On the other hand, conceptions 4 and 5 describe learning as an active process, where knowledge is constructed by the learner.

This theoretical basis provides a way to interpret some students' diary entries. There were many recordings about attempts to reproduce information - for example:

> "I'm having trouble reading for meaning - I tend to cover pages and pages and retain very little - my solution is to read important parts on to tape and I play this while I'm working in the kitchen, cooking, preparing meals, etc."

Even after completing an assignment, there seemed to be emphasis on memorisation -

> "There are parts of the course I find I am forgetting, so there will be a need to repeat much of the assignment work after it is finished."

Students' development as learners appears to have a limiting influence on their approach to study and constrains them to adopt surface-approaches to study, i.e. they focus attention on reproducing and memorising information. This is in contrast to taking a deep-approach, where the intention is to gain understanding, and go beyond the information given and focus on constructing meaning (Marton and Saljo, 1976).

There were suggestions of a deep-approach to study in some diaries. A sociology student described an evening's study session of about two hours as follows -

> "Some reading - perhaps more reflection than reading tonight. I enjoy reflection and find my real learning and understand is achieved this way. However the reading is the basis and essential starting point."

Besides students' development, aspects of course design and assessment will have an important influence on how they tackle their studies.

Course Design and Assessment

Aspects of assessment make a crucial impact upon students' experiences of learning. As Rowntree (1977) stressed 'the spirit and style of student assessment defines the de facto curriculum'.

Although a major impression from the diaries was the impact of students' social and domestic contexts of study - problems of 'getting down to it', almost continuous family interruptions, etc. - there were numerous references in diaries to 'finding what to do for assignments' - sussing out the system to establish what is really required.

Getting going for new students to external study also seems to have an emotional aspect - partly associated with lack of confidence.

> "Things I'd like to see changed - greater introductory lecture and tutorial coverage to 'break-in' new external students . . . the 'darkness' becomes your closest friend when studying alone - no matter how much assistance is set out it's difficult to specifically name problems to overcome. Just to have someone there to let you know if you are on the correct lines."

Wondering what to do for an assignment described in more concrete terms -

> "Read the books for sociology assignment - tried to precis Williams (text book) but couldn't get it down to 500 words. Decided it was the wrong approach. Am hoping that 'prose paraphrase' means giving a personal opinion of what is important in what he is saying."

The role and importance of statistics in the psychology course was questioned thus:

> "Can't work out with statistics whether you're supposed to follow the reasoning behind these formulae, or remember them, or simply know where to find them and use them if you need to."

The process of sussing-out the system and gaining a feel for what is required in assignments can be a difficult and slow process, especially for external students where the immediate student peer group is absent.

There are important variations in how students can relate to assignments as a focus for their study. Assignment-consciousness or cue-consciousness is a clear theme throughout the diaries. On one hand, some students seem aware that assignments place demands which will influence what is studied.

Some study patterns could be described as assignment blind. For example:

> "Tried to do some of the psychology assignment - but didn't make a lot of sense of it. Discovered I concentrated too much on what seemed to be the main emphasis of study for this month and only glossed over what turned out to be the basis for the first assignment - back to square one. It's taken me two hours to prove that I know virtually nothing and am on the wrong track."

There could hardly be a greater contrast to the strategic, confident engineering student, currently unemployed, taking five units by external study. The schedules and content of the assessment are the primary focus of study.

> "I want schedules - I'll have to pump out one assignment per week for the first semester."

Another interesting aspect of assessment-conscious students concerns those who know the system and have the confidence to telephone the teaching staff at the Institute. The unwritten code or 'hidden curriculum' is that help and assistance with assignments can be gained in this way.

The scope for dialogue and feedback was an important theme, under the broad area of aspects of course design. The isolation of students receiving grades on assignments, again touches on emotional and confidence issues of external study.

> "Just received my first assignment - a D! I've never had such a low mark - it was a hasty piece of work, perhaps I deserved it I feel very discouraged. The only bright spot is that the marker thinks I can do better."

The turnround time on assignments was vividly highlighted after a student had just completed and submitted an assignment.

> "Hope we get the result back quickly with plenty of comments - I've always found with external studies the time lag between sending in assignments and their return very frustrating, and usually you make the same mistakes in the next assignment."

Teaching and learning in weekend schools were frequently referred to in students' diaries. There were numerous entries about the size of groups at the weekend schools. Students were not wanting more lectures because this extraordinary component of being a student is infrequent for external students. Rather students wanted small group discussions, tutorials and facilities for dialogue about aspects of their learning.

> "The first weekend school - not very productive, an extremely large group, unmanageable for discussion . . . there was a general dissatisfaction expressed by students as to the content and format. It seems best to skip these sessions (they do clash with other units in my case) and form local study groups instead."

On the positive side, however, some lecturers at weekend schools were seen by students as stimulating interest and relevance. This aspect of weekend schools seems to be particularly important for students primarily wanting a qualification from external study (a vocational extrinsic orientation to study described earlier). A good lecture served to generate a vicarious experience of relevance and interest in the subject, as a way to get through the next requirement of the course.

Finally, for some students, the demands of external study came as a surprise with the abstract nature of academic study and the requirements of regular pacing and submission of assignments. One sociology student, with primarily a personal intrinsic orientation to study, commented -

> "Maybe I was very innocent, but I thought external part-time study would be done at a leisurely pace without the pressure of the full-time students. Instead I find the pressure greater than when I was last a full-time student."

Many students describe similar experiences in their diaries. It seems that we should regularly re-examine the admission counselling available and the basic information provided to new students.

The Social Context of External Study

Besides rather different teaching and learning methods of external study compared to on-campus students, the social context of study is extremely different.

Almost all the diaries made reference to 'finding time' for study in the face of competing work, domestic and social commitments. On one hand this could be labelled as problems of time management, however this misses more fundamental issues. The diaries show clearly a very traditional gender division of labour within the family.

For women students, especially, external study demands some reconstruction of the social structure within the family and domestic setting. Established patterns will require re-examination.

> "The reason I have to squeeze study in during the day is because I don't like studying while my husband is sitting all alone watching television, so any nights he has to go out are a real bonus."

Many of the women students referred to similar experiences - almost having to study in secret and at the same time be engaged in household domestic labour.

Even after a number of years of external study, women students felt an impression of resentment from husband and children. Changing aspirations will demand a change from other members of the household group.

> "Despite the difficulties, I'm glad I'm studying - it's nice to feel like a person again not just a mother - I like being a mother, but it's just not enough."

A supportive social context, besides enabling re-negotiation of roles with the family often provided students with their own self-help or study group. Informal discussions about assignment questions or what had been learnt helped to overcome the relatively small amount of dialogue between teacher and student, experienced by external students.

Phase Three

We sought, through the case studies of three individual students who filled in diaries, to bring the above concept to life and provide more details on educational background and social context. Names have been changed to provide anonymity.

Student Number One

Pam is a housewife in her early thirties. She has one pre-school child and two older children. She left school at fifteen, married eighteen months later -

> "and then spent 12 years caring for children before feeling the need to do something else just for myself."

She thus brings an intrinsic personal orientation to her studies, although extrinsic personal motivation is also evidenced when she refers to -

> "the pride I feel when I call tell people that I hope one day to have a business degree, when I thought that I would never amount to anything more than a housewife or perhaps a clerk."

There is evidence also of intrinsic and extrinsic academic motivation, although the primary orientation to study is personal.

> "Bookkeeping and Maths are two things that I get a lot of pleasure from - making sense out of numbers, gleaning hidden information from them. I got an 'A' for Corporate Accounting last year and I was thrilled to bits."

Her comments about learning as memorising suggest that she uses a surface approach -

> "If I can't work through something and then remember it, it's been wasted . . . that's why I try to spend a lot of time on it right through the semester rather than cramming at the end - to try and get a better understanding because it's going to take a long time for me to get this degree and if that's the pattern I'm going to forget the earlier units that I've learnt by the time I get to the end. So I'm determined to get a better understanding of it all - to be able to remember it."

However, her confidence in bookkeeping and maths reflects an unacknowledged awareness that 'understanding' involves more than memorisation. She refers to a Study Guide which contained a number of errors and states that she -

> "ended up going right through it, and crossing out most of it, and changing it to the correct answers because . . . I had a fairly good understanding of it so it wasn't a real problem to me but my friend didn't, so I gave it to her changed and said - 'now work through it. That's done properly, now you'll understand it a bit better'."

A surface approach may be more likely when the learning task is unfamiliar. Pam left school early and -

> "never really had any instruction on putting my thoughts down on paper."

Hence she states that her approach depends on the unit -

> Accounting is mostly maths work, practical work. I don't have any troubles with that. I enjoy doing it. But with the other ones, where there's a lot of thinking, a lot of reading, and I've got to try and put my thoughts down on paper, they're entirely different."

She attempts to be systematic in her approach -

> "I think about what question has to be answered and break it down into a no. of questions and sort of pinpoint the answer to each one as best I can."

But in searching for the answers she uses a surface approach -

> "I can read a novel for hours on end and I can remember what happened on the first page, but to read something like Galbraith, I can't remember the last sentence and it's most frustrating."

She uses the grades she has gained as indicators of whether appropriate learning has occurred, but suffers from lack of verbal feedback and is diffident about approaching lecturers -

> "When I got a 'B' I felt like going to the lecturer and saying 'what did I do right?' because I was very surprised to get the 'B', but then there were so many other people who seemed to want to talk to the lecturer at the time, that I felt it was unfair of me to be looking for things, when I got a good mark and I was thinking then that maybe that's the way to work on it - to try to do the plan first - to pick out all the questions in the original question and work on each separately. If I try to use that sort of plan as a basis for the next one, and I do well at that, then I know that I'm on the right track."

Thus lack of confidence in approaching lecturers due to -

> "my own inadequacy I suppose - insecurity - worry about approaching 'demigods' ", and fear of "being made to seem stupid."

She does not have some positive social and intellectual support in her studies from a friend enrolled in the same unit, and she values discussions which can lead to -

> "a clearer understanding for both of us" and "alleviate the feelings of isolation connected with being an external student".

While some assistance is provided through this relationship, the problems associated with unfamiliar learning tasks, a difficult study situation, and lack of confidence, suggest the need for plentiful lecturer support through well organised study materials, verbal as well as grade assessment, and lecturer/student contact where possible. Good grades appear important in building confidence but, unless they are explained, their assistance in facilitating learning may be minimal -

> "I was wishing there were written comments - letting me know which points had been covered well and which hadn't. Obviously there were some things that I was missing out on, otherwise I would have got an 'A' and, if so, what were they?

Careful organisation of Weekend Schools appears correspondingly important, incorporating non-threatening opportunities for lecturer/student contact, initiated by the lecturer. Weekend Schools may be valued as a social experience as much as a learning experience -

> "I enjoy being part of the Institute and being there when everyone else is there battling along in the same way that I am. Sometimes I don't get a lot out of it but I still wouldn't miss it because there's always the chance that it is going to be very valuable".

But provision of well organised learning experiences, along with informal lecturer contact should help fulfil both aims and increase the likelihood of a deep approach to study.

Student Number Two

Don is in his early forties and is married with four children. He is an unemployed engineer "knocking up units to get a further qualification". His employment situation thus contributes to an obvious vocational extrinsic orientation towards his studies -

> "in some aspects I've become redundant. I'm employed, not by choice, and I definitely need to upgrade and update."

However, he also shows evidence of academic intrinsic and extrinsic orientations.

> "I'm interested in studying for its own sake and I'm always interested to achieve a reasonable standard."

His enjoyment of study is an asset in "pumping out one assignment per week for first semester to survive and pass each of the 5 units being tackled".

The heavy workload fosters a strategic approach to learning -

> "the recommended time for the first assignment is given as 2 weeks. Does this mean full-time at 10 hours/day, full-time at 5 minutes/day, full-time at 2 hours/day? I have 5 assignments to complete this month so the '2 weeks' recommended is not practical."

In line with this approach, he charts the assignment date for each month and tables the value of assessment components, noting the minimum required in each case for a pass, and is consequently preoccupied with balancing assignments, grades and time -

> "when another assignment is due out in three or four days time, then I've got to cut my losses. Initially I aim for 100% but then I've got to cut it down and just be satisfied with a pass."

Within the limitations of this assignment-consciousness he sees himself as having become "more and more active in the (learning) process although examinations provide the main stimulus to this activity". He has the surface approach characteristic of perceiving learning as "getting information from the lecturer or text books", but his comparison of learning to the completion of a jigsaw puzzle -

> "looking at each little increment put before me and grasping it and putting it together"

pre-supposes an active reconstruction of knowledge which is associated with deep learning approaches.

He is continually pulled from intrinsic academic interest and a deep approach, towards extrinsic aims and a strategic surface approach -

> "I get fired up on this and then I look up my diary to see what other assignments are due and the program and number of subjects I've got to get through to get a degree. I'm looking to see ... what are my losses, what are my gains if I don't make it with this subject."

> "Lecturers fire one's enthusiasm but the drudge of actually soaking up information and outputting assignments dampens that enthusiasm."

His lack of employment, and his study commitments, have affected his role in the household -

> "My wife is also studying so we have to balance things out ... my approach and attitudes have been very important in making it all possible."

His family responsibilities influence his strategic approach -

> "I'm always compromising family requirements and this dictates how I structure my time."

He appears to enjoy this family involvement, bringing to it the positive, confident attitudes with which he approaches his study:

> "spent morning at the local kindergarten doing 'milk and fruit' duty and assisting where required; good fun and good experience, as well as being an excellent opportunity to look at my third daughter in a kinder situation."

But his study time is, consequently, continually interrupted -

> "the only peaceful time at our place is after 9 pm. Study then becomes pleasurable."

The social context of his study and the heavy workload create a need for study material that will allow for optimum use of limited time. He mentions the assistance of -

> "a well-structured study guide that lists references clearly so that .. you can quickly sift through",

and of information that is "as pre-packaged as possible", involving text books that are closely associated with the course.

He points to the importance of advance organisers -

> "I want to know where I'm headed and why I'm headed there; what are the overall objectives of the subject",

and of assignments that are evenly paced -

> "being a bit slack and having other priorities, it is essential that the work be sent off in little parcels; that every week or two weeks something is sent off instead of, say, reaching a period of six months and then you've got an assignment to put in which is a huge thing because you tend to put this to the last".

For Don it seems that while pressures of time and assessment requirements tend to encourage surface approaches, the provision of paced, small assignments might allow for more active learning throughout the course, perhaps reducing the stress associated with assessment and minimising the perceived compromises that need to be made with grades -

> "the 'Study by Assignment' method suits me more than the old Yallourn Technical College method of 'attending classes with minds receptive'.

Student Number Three

Rae is a housewife in her mid-twenties. She has three young children and describes herself as "despite frequent resolutions - one of the most poorly organised people in the whole wide world". Her aim in studying is to gain a teaching qualification. She had previously studied full-time to this end at another institution, but did not complete the course.

She reveals a definite vocational extrinsic orientation to her studies -

> "I'm very materialistic, I want a diploma at the end which will give me a job eventually."

Rae also shows evidence of intrinsic academic and personal orientations in her appreciation of 'intellectual stimulation' and 'relevant learning which enriches even your understanding of life', but these are secondary -

> "I love it. I sat down the other night rather reluctantly to do some research and came across something that put things in a whole new light. It gives me a good feeling and extends my understanding of the situation I'm in now ..... but that's a bonus. I do love studying and getting something out of it. It's terrific."

Corresponding to her major and minor orientations, Rae distinguishes between "book learning" and "meaningful learning". Thus, she recognises the active process associated with a deep approach to learning.

> "If I'm getting something out of that knowledge, not just theoretical bumpff, it becomes part of my whole life experience. If you use theoretical knowledge together with practical experience, then you've really got something meaningful."

However, Rae regards the learning involved in her studies as primarily "book learning" and adopts a surface approach as she sees this as the means of passing the exams and completing the course, "the main aim is to give the tutors what they're looking for."

She is consequently "syllabus bound" and places great emphasis on gaining clear direction from lecturers and study guides -

> "I didn't really know what was wanted and this fact made it very difficult to study the subject. I thought the study guides were very badly worded and every time we raised the question with the lecturers they couldn't seem to put their needs into concrete terms."

The social context of her studies amidst substantial family and domestic responsibilities, intensifies her reliance on this approach -

> "If I can sit down with a question and know exactly what is expected of me, then I know which direction to go in and know I'm not wasting my time, and time's a bit of a luxury, I find."

Her spouse is supportive 'which helps', but this trends to be passive and insufficient to alleviate the stress of trying to study in less than optimum conditions. There is a "disorganisation" that results from her gender role -

> "Had a really frustrating day on Sunday trying to study with the kids making mayhem around me. I have no separate place to study, just a desk made of a wardrobe door with two wardrobe drawers on either end in a corner of the loungeroom. It's walled off with beanbags, but Susie's worked out how to beat them now. On that particular day Fred's support was in theory only - he didn't take responsibility for the kids or meals."

Consequently her orientation, her approach to learning, and the social context of her studies, converge to support a clearly perceived requirement for well designed courses, presented by "enthusiastic and committed" staff. She requests that it be 'really emphasised to the lecturers how critical time is to us and how we don't like it being wasted'.

While such syllabus-dependence may seem to counter an institutional priority for deep learning, she also states that her "interest in a subject seems directly proportional to the interest/enthusiasm/skill of the organisers", implying that deep learning is more likely to result from well organised courses, as she feel that, 'taking a college course isn't necessarily related to learning'.

The context of her studies and her requirements relating to course design also have implications for assessment. Rae regards herself as a mediocre student, 'because I can't give it the commitment of time that it needs to make a better student', although she recognises that, 'if I got a good grade it would be easier to get a teaching position'. However, she feels that the development of her interest in a course, which she relates to the effectiveness of course design, is also associated with gaining good grades and, as 'a bonus', she is likely to achieve 'really meaningful' or deep learning.

Rae's stress on the clarity of course materials, and the importance of time, are also relevant to organisational aspects of her external study. Weekend Schools are seen as useful if the 'lecturers' requirements' need clarification, but if the course is well organised 'all the information I want is in the study guide' and she would prefer to spend the equivalent time 'going to a friend's place to do a bit of study'.

Consequently, from the point of view of Rae, and given the constraints of her time, the resources of the institution are better directed towards refinement of external materials than the development of face-to-face learning activities. Weekend Schools are not valued in terms of peer relationships, and she would prefer to organise the social contacts associated with her learning informally.

Conclusion

Many students and staff have participated in this study, and we thank them. Looking at the ways that external students approach their study in distance education helps them see how their peers cope with the pressures and distractions; and also helps them recognise their strengths as a mature age students. The insights provided into study methods offer the lecturer help both in the design and writing of their study materials and also helps them to guide their students through their learning to success in study.

A complementary study is currently underway to see how Gippsland Institute students use their study guides, and in particular to see what effect the textual design of the printed material has on student learning.

We thank all those academic staff and students who have participated in these studies for their collaboration.

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